



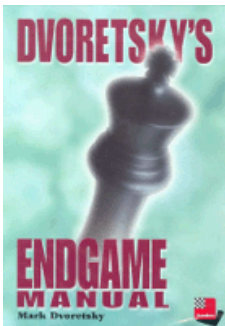
COLUMNISTS

The Instructor

Mark Dvoretsky



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The Problem is Not the Time Control

This month, a conversation with Oleg Pervakov (in bold below) from the Russian magazine *64 – Chess Review* initiated by the [December 2011 article](#) about the game Bacrot – Robson.

The FIDE President has proposed a new championship system that supposedly attracts more attention to chess. One in which classic, rapid, and blitz chess will be used to determine the absolute champion of the world. How do you feel about this?

I am against it, not just the proposal itself, but also against the "procedure" for its adoption. Ilyumzhinov does not analyze the consequences of unilateral decision-making by first conducting preliminary experiments – justified or not. His expert opinion, by and large, is that he is not interested. The FIDE President and his associates essentially denounced serious chess – saying that it is unspectacular, and that it is necessary to adopt faster time controls to attract additional interest in chess, with regards to TV broadcasts. They have moved in this direction for a long time now, with a time control that is steadily decreasing, yet there is no increase in interest in classical or quick chess, and little TV coverage. So, perhaps "the problem" was not the time control.

Vladimir Kramnik recently noted one of the greatest dangers of this kind of solution: once it is legislated to reduce the time control, we run the risk of hitting the slippery slope of no return. When Ilyumzhinov introduced the "knockout" championship (here my opinion differs with Kramnik – I think that this system has proven itself), it was not difficult to return to a tournament or match format. The transition to a rapid time control is different. Both Kramnik and I believe that the results have been negative, but getting back to a normal, serious game is already difficult. After all, rapid is convenient for organizers and the chess is easier – it is played quickly, if things do not work out as planned, we immediately move to another tournament.

So Ilyumzhinov must first prove, not in words but in practice, that the transition to a rapid format actually increases the popularity of chess. And prove it convincingly: be it in increased audience attendance or the addition of thousands of fans on the Internet. (In fact, I'm sure this will not be so.)

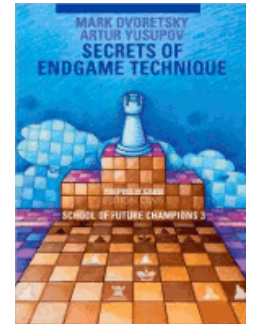
In an interview, the Chairman of the Board of the Russian Chess Federation, Ilya Levitov, claims that well-organized tournaments brings about rapid "Kremlin stars." But did the world championship match with a classical time control of two-and-a-half hours for forty moves have less of an audience? Only one game per day; and the room was crammed with those wanting to see firsthand the game's strongest players!

Entertainment depends on several factors. Even having a good coffee shop would attract more viewers than the change in time control. And what if we add the commentary of well-known grandmasters and organize simultaneous games, contests, and solving tournaments for studies? Take the traditional "classic" tournaments, such as Wijk aan Zee, London, or Dortmund: there is a large audience because of the deliberate and well-organized program.

In Dortmund, the audience does not even have to buy tickets.

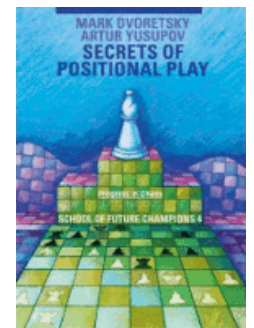
So you see! In general, though, it is wrong to compare a well organized tournament and rapid chess. For example, the "classic" Russian championship, was held in closed quarters, with no buffet, and no direct

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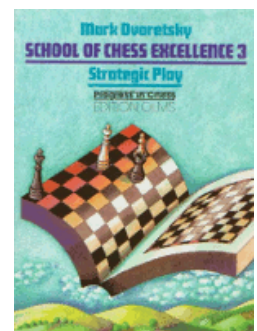
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communication by the commentators to the audience. Yet the last Tal Memorial (classical chess) was held in one of the most beautiful buildings in Moscow, the "Pashkov House," and immediately the number of viewers increased dramatically.

Ilyumzhinov proposes that a simple survey is enough. To accept comments and suggestions until a certain date before the change is implemented.

Yet the vast majority of skilled people do not participate in the polls. In particular, because similar surveys have been conducted, and if the results were poor, FIDE simply did not pay attention. In addition, much depends on how you pose the question. If you ask, for example, whether one likes to play rapid or blitz, almost everyone answers affirmatively. But when asked what kind of chess should predominate, almost all GMs have expressed a clear choice in favor of classical time controls. The problem of reducing the time control should be discussed extensively and professionally. This is a very serious issue to make a decision so easily and blithely.

But opponents of the classic time control contend that the audience does not stay.

Exactly. So what?

So, chess must entertain.

Of course. Now we turn to the merits.

I want to draw attention to an important caveat, which, in my opinion, has not yet been discussed. In competitions in any sport there are many intermediate events, which in themselves are interesting for the spectators, other than the final result (win or draw). There can be magnificent plays, or passes, or volleys in soccer or tennis that captivate the audience who watch the process of the struggle, switching attention from one episode to another, noting the fleeting successes and failures of the athletes.

In chess, there are no similar activities. Some may find it interesting to observe the behavior of players: the grandmaster scratches his head in search of a good move, grimaces, or is faced with a surprise. But this is just a curiosity, secondary to what is happening on the board. It is much less spectacular than what we see in other sports, and will never be a great incentive to attract viewers. In chess, most of what is going on is largely behind the scenes. This organic property of chess makes it less accessible to the masses. Still, with a long time control the commentator can explain what is happening on the board, and the viewer has the time to try to understand the intentions of players. With rapid time controls this is impossible.

The audience for chess can be divided into three categories:

The first category is the spectators who are present in the tournament hall, who come and watch the game as it is played. Compared with popular sports, it is a small audience, and it always will be. Monitoring the game in this way is only interesting to someone who already knows the rules of chess. Fans of football or tennis can recruit from virtually the entire population, as the rules can be explained in a few minutes, and the person is immediately able to watch a match with interest. Actually, there are a large number of individuals who play chess, and the expansion of this group, of course, is our real goal; for instance, we can only welcome the teaching of chess in school.

The second category of viewers is much more extensive – those who watch chess competitions via the Internet. Here tens and even hundreds of thousands of viewers participate. It is clear that this audience is more important. It is true that they do not pay money for viewing the broadcasts, but popular sites receive more advertising or membership fees and thus there is a commercial effect. However, I am not an expert on such matters and I cannot say to what extent.

The third category of viewers, which is very large, is the one that advocates of

a transition to rapid time controls have completely ignored. The advantage that chess has over other sports is its longevity. A game is not only followed in the heat of the moment, but for years, decades, and centuries later. The best games are discussed in magazines, on websites, and in books. Who will review in the passage of time, say, a tennis match? Yet, we have the opposite: the study of books and articles maintains an interest over a sustained period of time.

Annotators help to see that games, whether played in the past or present, are entertaining and instructive. Readers (or viewers) can then become directly involved in the process by seeking their own ideas. This "cooperation" between the recognized authorities and amateurs is one of the most attractive features of chess, which is absent in other sports.

This only applies to classical chess?

Of course. To seriously discuss rapid and blitz chess makes no sense. It's not even a real game. Yes, the player can intuitively guess the subtle and interesting move, but with such a time control great ideas cannot be found. It is the inner beauty and logic of chess that attracts people by appealing to their aesthetic sensibilities.

Beauty may exist in a small combination.

Of course. But for the most part combinations executed in a rapid time control are standard in nature, they are quite obvious and therefore of little interest. In a classic chess match one has the creative element, as well as the same level of "sport." The endless original ideas of grandmasters captivate not only fans, but also experienced professionals.

There is another aspect here. We delve into analysis and discuss the options, and not only because it's interesting. Prolonged searches in chess teach us to think of truth over the board, and having to find difficult, non-obvious solutions. Deepening a position in speed chess completely loses its practical significance in view of the inapplicability of this in actual practice – instead there will be demand for good opening and endgame knowledge, with a quick response.

Therein lies the main danger of acceleration of pace. Speeding up the time control will gradually eliminate the third category of audience, because the games will lack practical relevance and be of low creative content. This will deal a terrible blow to the chess industry. Games will become bare information only, relegated to news feeds. This will sharply reduce the interest in chess, and will diminish the influx of new fans, and, as a result, players.

In order to avoid misunderstanding, I must note that I protest the attempts to displace normal chess with fast play, not rapid or blitz in general. I love them both, and if I were to choose which to play – classic or rapid – I would choose rapid. Quick chess is good for demonstrations. They are sometimes appropriate for professional competition, and even more so, they are indispensable for some amateur tournaments. The everyday working player does not play in serious tournaments, but will engage in rapid play. Rapid chess is also useful for training. When we were engaged in Yusupov's opening preparation, we had to check our lines by playing games in rapid chess (serious training games would require too much time). In short, rapid and blitz has its own scope, which is quite extensive, but it should not go beyond that.

Let us talk about audiences who watch the games in the tournament hall or on the Internet. I completely disagree with the assumption that it is more interesting to see rapid games than serious classical ones, and will try to show this.

In football or tennis a spectator watches the entire game, so as not to miss some important moment. It would be absurd to expect this from a chess audience. A spectator present in the playing hall is not going to sit still for six or seven hours. They are free to move about and even watch the game from

other areas of the venue if the organizers provide monitors. Even distracted by half-an-hour, the audience will miss very little, because they always will be able follow the events that occurred during their absence. In the meantime, they can eat, socialize with friends, listen to expert commentary, and try to guess potential moves. Who knows what else you can provide that is interesting to the audience at a chess tournament? Technically, organizing all this is simple and the financial costs of implementing it are small compared to, say, a prize fund.

As for the Internet spectator, he may watch the opening phase of the game, return to work for a while, and then check back in to see what has changed. He can play through the previous moves, or read the notes made by the commentator, and follow several games at once. If he desires, he can check something on the board with the use of an engine. It is not required to follow the moves at the pace at which they were made on the board. Not all episodes of the struggle will be of interest – some may be skipped to focus on the most meaningful moments to that particular viewer. Everyone has the right to choose the method of viewing the game that is best for them.

But all this is feasible only when the game continues long enough. In rapid chess, viewers, especially those who are unskilled, have no time to assess what is happening on the board and no ability to pause at interesting moments to consider or discuss them. Even more so, when there are multiple games of interest ongoing. The only thing of interest is the final result of the games, and this can be learned at the end of the day. All, or almost all, of the chess content that is interesting to an audience slips away.

Ilya Levitov in an interview at chess-news.ru vividly described his feelings as a fan.

"I cannot sit seven hours to watch the game. Even on the Internet. The game starts at three, he [GM Bareev] comes to me at four, five, six, we look, we analyze something. For me it's great fun to guess the moves. I get a huge rush. It is interesting when you start to think along with the chess player. That is, you take a position, saying: "What if ... so maybe that's the plan." And then he makes a move that you guessed – it's interesting. But after that we can take a break. You cannot just sit for seven hours."

All very true, in fact, it describes exactly what I said.

So, a transition to a rapid time control would cause a decline in the chess culture.

Of course. Moreover, a reality will result that was expressed many years ago in a sadly ironic maxim of master Oleg Mosaic: "Chess is just a hand board game."

Interesting is, for example, the opinion of Kramnik:

"Chess is an intellectual activity. And, like any intellectual activity, it is elitist. Maybe that's not quite the right word, but I do not think he [Ilyumzhinov] will ever bring thousands of chess fans. Chess is very closely linked with culture and with the presence of some intelligence. This is our trump ace. And to give it up to forge some mythical popularity among people who like, say, baseball or basketball? I would choose a different niche."

I understand that there are those who will call for a shift from elitism to democracy, but this is just juggling words. Kramnik is right in principle. Incidentally, computer technology is one of the most promising directions for us. Chess uses computer and Internet technology to its advantage far more than any other sport. The problem is how to turn this advantage into mutually beneficial relationships with potential sponsors, but this is a matter for marketing professionals.

I welcome a public debate on this subject, but only an exchange of real arguments, rather than empty statements by apologists for speed chess. I

cannot stand demagoguery, such as the argument that we live in a fast age, and we have to follow the increased pace of life. We can in fact say the opposite: a higher level of chess needs to be played with more subtle nuances – and to find them we need more time. That's all – no substantive arguments and only verbal gymnastics.

Of course, there are real arguments in favor of speeding up the game. One is too much opening theory, pushing the boundaries of the "independent" game farther and farther away from the starting position. Accordingly, fewer moves require independent thinking. This is really an argument that is worth discussing. But there are counter-arguments. First, the pace of the game is accelerated: before tournaments were held with the time control at two-and-a-half hours for forty moves; now it is two-hours for forty moves or even less – that is, chess players have significantly less lead time than before. Secondly, not every game "starts" after, say, the twentieth move. Often the struggle still occurs early in the game. And not necessarily from the fact that your opponent springs a new opening innovation. The player may simply not be ready, as he does not have to remember all that opening theory.

Let me add a point. Theory has advanced tremendously, but not as far as wide. At the dawn of opening theory Alekhine and Capablanca contested theory, albeit a narrow and even poor one according to our notions. In most games where Capablanca had the black pieces, they played out the same version of the Orthodox Defense to the Queen's Gambit with the transition to the endgame, and the novelty began somewhere around the twentieth move. And remember the game of the Soviet era Novikov – Tukmakov, where the first new move in a Grünfeld was applied on the thirty-sixth move, and Novikov's analysis extended more than fifty moves!

Yes, today's grandmasters opening preparation results in endgame positions, but mostly they are not realized on the board. Indeed, opponents are also aware of this and try to evade preparation, turning the game into something less studied and more of a surprise. But here we are dealing with an entirely different issue, one that I have often wrote about, and which has a negative influence on modern chess opening theory – a dimensionless enlargement. But this is another topic, the time control has nothing to do with it.

I remember the game in the last round of the Russian Championship Super Final 2011, Galkin – Kramnik, which I commented on live. There the "independent" game began with the very first moves. Kramnik, with black, over-the-board, without any preparation, built a very clear strategy to cast doubt on the plan chosen by Galkin. And these fights are not the only exceptions.

Many believe that the popularity of chess would be improved if you eliminated draws; for instance, by making them be replayed. What do you think about this?

A draw is a completely natural result, as, incidentally, in football, where no one is talking about eliminating the draw. Should chess players compete for three outcomes or only two? This process of canceling draws will not be fun. One can learn the end results of games from the Internet, and it does not make sense to travel to the tournament to do that. But it is not only important to reveal the winner of the game, but also the process of the struggle.

The replayed game from that draw will be played with a short time control. Recall that in the knockout tournament, some participants tried to decide the outcome of the fight in the "rapids" and willingly made quick draws in the major battles.

One reason why rapid chess is promoted by Ilyumzhinov is because of cheating. Thus, one does not have to buy expensive equipment to check the players.

"The best remedy for a headache – the guillotine!" The only way to avoid problems is to not play the game at all. Cheating is a very important issue, although it is not discussed enough. Feller's French Chess Federation took the initiative, and was bent on disqualifying him – they did not wait for the

slightest support from FIDE. In fact, there are tools that require little cost. For example, the most severe rules regarding disqualification deter cheaters. FIDE does not want to consider, nor to discuss the various options – it is simply going to "decapitate" classical chess. Cheating would indeed be more difficult, but the consequences would be too grave.

In conclusion, I would like to return to **Bacrot – Robson**:



[FEN "r3qk2/1p3p2/1n2p1p1/1p2N2p/p2PP2P/P5P1/1P2QPK1/3R4 w - - 0 31"]

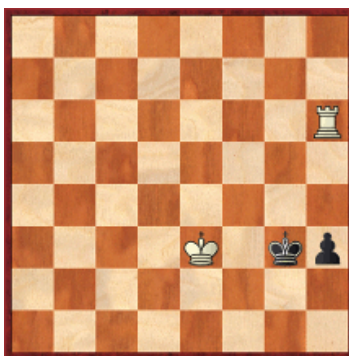
In my December 2011 column I wrote, "White's positional advantage is determined by his better pawn structure and the possibility of soon creating a passed pawn in the center with d4-d5. But besides these long-term pluses he also has some fleeting, temporary ones: the positions of the black rook, knight, and even king are not very good. If he lets his opponent make one or two moves unimpeded (for example, 30...Rd8 or 30...Rc8 and 31...Nc4), the temporary factors evaporate and White's overall advantage diminishes. That's why it made sense to start active play on the kingside without delay, where only the black king was located, lacking support from the other pieces. I suggest 31.g4!"

This is an interesting solution, which achieves a much larger white advantage compared with other ideas. In principle, it is very easy to miss such things in the rapid time control, because it stands out from the previous course of the game. One need not reproach Bacrot for this omission, but if it were a normal time control, then there would be occasion to reflect on possible flaws in his decision-making process.

Well, blunders in the endgame.

Of course, gross errors, which can be avoided with better study on the theory of endings. Such knowledge helps even in rapid chess. This was the main idea of my commentary to the game. On the other hand, the players are "in the box" here, tired, under stress, so that in rapid and blitz chess flaws occur, even with a good knowledge of the endgame.

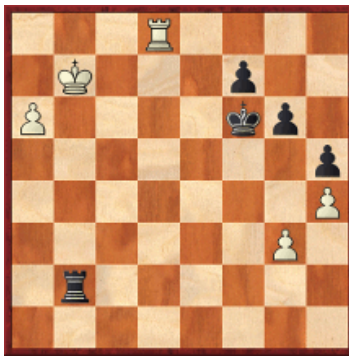
Two examples from the game **Bacrot – Robson**, as discussed last month:



[FEN "8/8/7R/8/8/4K1kp/8/8 b - - 0 87"]

87...h2??

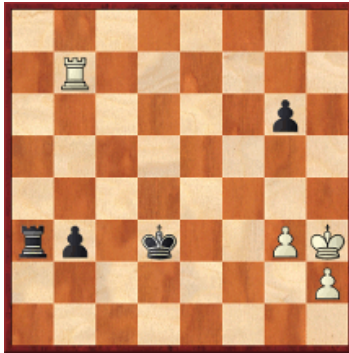
And earlier:



[FEN "3R4/1K3p2/P4kp1/7p/7P/6P1/1r6/8 w - - 0 73"]

The game saw **73.Ka8?**. Instead, Müller's winning move is **73.Ka7!!**. One does not find such moves intuitively – to find it, we should think carefully.

I recall a similar incident, described in [Secrets of Endgame Technique](#) from a position that could have occurred in the game **Lapin – Utyatsky**:



[FEN "8/1R6/6p1/8/8/rp1k2PK/7P/8 b - - 0 1"]

After **1...Kc2 2.Rc7+**, only the paradoxical move **2...Kb2!!** leads to a win. It is somewhat similar to Müller's suggestion in Bacrot – Robson, but the idea here is the interference. For example, if **3.Kg4**, then **3...Ra5! 4.Rc6 Ka3! 5. Rxc6 b2 6.Rb6 Ra4+** and **7...Rb4**. And if **3.Rc6**, then **3...Ra4!**.

At a normal time control an ordinary master, playing black, can expect to successfully solve the problem. Nevertheless, Bacrot, a strong grandmaster, did not find the right solution, and could not find it, given the acute shortage of time. Does this not frighten supporters of "speeding up the game"? I do not want to see the extinction of subtle ideas in chess practice.

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